Ethnicities

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A South Asian American diasporic aesthetic community?

Ethnicity and New York City's 'Asian electronic music' scene

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ABSTRACT In the late 1990s, a diverse group of British South Asian musicians began to gain notoriety in the UK for their distinctive blends of synthesized beats with what were considered South Asian elements (e.g. tabla, sitar and 'Hindustani' samples). Following these successes, the British media industries engaged in discourses on whether these South Asian musicians should be labelled under pre-existing musical genres such as acid jazz and electronic music or under an ethnically oriented classification such as 'The Asian Underground'. Despite vociferous opposition, the latter categorization became the most promulgated. However, this discourse underwent a second iteration when South Asian musicians in New York City created a dance night largely influenced by their transatlantic diasporic colleagues. The purpose of this study was to examine the tensions between ethnically categorizing this New York dance night and not doing so. Using ethnographic data gathered during three months of fieldwork in 2001 as well as through a web-based questionnaire, this study yields interesting findings regarding not only ethnic labelling, but also the larger debate of ethnic essentialism. More specifically, the findings suggest that, on the one hand, ethnically labelling this dance hall as South Asian could facilitate an increased solidarity (sociopolitically) within the diaspora in New York City. While, on the other hand, such labelling could be dangerous to diasporic interests, as it essentializes the South Asian community into a homogenous entity.

KEYWORDS Asian identity ● diaspora ● essentialism ● exoticism ● South Asian popular culture

> I believe it is possible to approach the music as a *changing* rather than an unchanging same. Today, this involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions [. . .] of the post-contemporary world. (Paul Gilroy, 1993: 101)

Inspired by British South Asian musicians, DJs Rekha Malhotra and Vivek Bald (a.k.a. DJ Siraiki) founded a regular dance night – Mutiny – in November 1997 in New York City.[1] Like their British antecedents, Mutiny proffered a music based on synthesized and/or digitized electronic beats and samples. Though not exclusively, Mutiny also showcased South Asian musicians who fused these electronic soundscapes with musical influences traditionally associated with the Indian subcontinent (e.g. tablas, sitar, and Hindustani vocals). And like similar dance halls in the UK, DJs Rekha and Siraiki were faced with the decision of whether to label Mutiny as an Asian electronic music dance hall or as an ethnically non-essentialized one.[2] They chose the latter.

At a prima facie level, it appears that the tension experienced by Mutiny's founders was one of ethnic essentialism versus anti-essentialism. However, this relationship is far more complex and is, perhaps, a corollary to a larger tension, involving, as Paul Gilroy (1993: 101) argues, the reproduction of cultural traditions as either fixed essences or as changing hybrid forms subject to the 'breaks' and 'interruptions' of modernity. The object of this study is to explore the process by which the 'Asian electronic music' scene in New York City contested an ethnically essentialized versus ethnically non-essentialized labelling of Mutiny. It should be noted also that the aforementioned deliberation was not only a product of, but also generated by, various broader political tensions surrounding ethnicity in general, such as racism and the exclusionary American stereotypes of Asians as a high-achieving 'model minority' (Kibria, 2006; Rangaswamy, 2000). Specifically, the essentialization of South Asians in America as a homogenous group of wealthy professionals has been at the expense of less visible members of the diaspora, such as New York City's taxi drivers (Mathew, 2005; Mathew and Prashad, 2000[1999]). The tensions between essentialism and anti-essentialism within the Asian electronic music scene were couched within a progressive desire to increase the visibility of these individuals and shatter the monolithic construction of an Asian 'model minority'.

'Asian electronic music' is a niche style of 'electronic music', as acid jazz is a niche style of jazz. Electronic music uses turntables, samplers, synthesizers, digital effects and other methods of technological manipulation (both analog and digital) to forge an explicitly syncretic 'electronic' form.[3] This broad genre encompasses everything from electronic dance music to more restrictive categories such as jungle, and drum and bass, which all use computer-based editing and/or samplers. 'Asian electronic music' uses this 'electronic' framework to weave together samples and styles from such

diverse genres as jazz, drum and bass, techno, classical Hindustani, reggae, dub, Bhangra, house, hip hop, and Bollywood soundtracks. However, the relationship between 'Asian electronic music' and 'electronic music' extends beyond a simple musical classification. Rather, 'Asian electronic music' is also a scene that encompasses the production and consumption of this music in bars and dance halls. In New York City, the scene's nexus was the Mutiny club. Asian electronic music in New York City should not be conflated with the Punjabi influenced, dhol-based, Bhangra 'party'/'desi remix' scenes that Maira (1999; 2002; 2005b) describes.[4] Also, contra Kumar (2002: 198), this article conceives of Mutiny and its DJs as distinct to the reified New York City South-Asian 'desi' musical scene he describes. This is not to say that Asian electronic music is mutually exclusive to Bhangra or other South Asian musical scenes, but rather the diversity of these scenes should not be elided.

LABELLING THE SCENE[5]

The premise that ethnic labels are important social constructions has been established in the literature (Eriksen, 1993; Fenton, 1999; Parsons, 1975; Shankar and Srikanth, 1998; Smith, 1992). These labels are, of course, not static; they reflect changing underlying sociopolitical currents. For example, as Smith (1992: 496) observes, the term used to refer to Americans with 'black' ancestral ties has shifted from 'Colored' to 'Negro' to 'Black' and now, arguably, to 'African-American'. Additionally, as Joppke (1996: 483) observes, the term 'black' was strategically extended to include Asians during the British antiracist struggles of the 1980s. Though these ethnic labels have been contested and, over time, changed, they clearly nonetheless continue to be extremely relevant and reflective of deeper positions within the discourse of ethnicity.

Though essentialism in ethnic labelling and otherwise can clearly be problematic both in theory and praxis (Brunner, 1998; Fuchs, 2001; Gilroy, 1993; Jenkins, 1997; Omi and Winant, 1986), it can also, as McLennan (1996: 65) argues, be 'functionally' useful for describing complex social entities such as the 'Asian electronic music' scene in New York City. Shankar (1998: 49) echoes this sentiment in reference to the labelling of Asians when she argues that 'the act of naming [South Asians] involves political and strategic choices', including, but not limited to, the political, economic and social representation of South Asians. She further elaborates that 'names essentialize', but 'we cannot operate without them', referring to her belief of the functional usefulness of ethnic labelling (Shankar, 1998: 51). This functional distinction is critical in that some level of essentialism of South Asian as a group is operationally needed.

However, such a theorization of essentialism is incomplete, as it lacks an analysis of the motives behind this labelling. Gilroy's (1993: 31) distinction that ethnic labelling can be 'loosely identified' by two distinct, but symbiotic, perspectives – the essentialist and the pluralist – is a useful starting point.[6] The former supports pan-diasporic essentialisms and the latter positions ethnic labelling as an 'open signifier'. However, what is missing in Gilroy's neat dyad is a nuanced handling of not only the volitions behind the labelling but also the intersections between the 'pluralist' and 'essentialist'. The pluralist and essentialist are not discrete camps, but rather can overlap. This is exemplified in Sayyid's (2006) attempt to label Asians in the UK as he seeks to affirm the diversity of South Asians in the UK, whilst retaining the political potentials of an essentialized meta-signifier. This is a case in point when ethnic groups are essentialized for positivist political struggles.[7] One incarnation of this type of essentialism is Spivak's concept of 'strategic essentialism' – the '*strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest' (Spivak, 1988: 205). This includes essentialism for self-representation, but not for 'unscrupulous' ends such as exploitation. The ambiguity of '(un)scrupulous' is hardly unproblematic, as Warren (1998: 69–85), in her work on Guatemalan Mayas, highlights. However, despite its vagaries, it is nonetheless crucial for understanding the volition behind labelling the scene in New York City.

Though the term essentialism is laden with pejorative meanings, its 'strategic' use can be positive. For example, Morton (2003: 75) in his work on Spivak cites an Iranian case (made well known by Chandra Talpade Mohanty) as an example of politically useful strategic essentialism. Mohanty (2003: 34) argues when Iranian middle-class women voluntarily veiled themselves in the 1979 revolution 'to indicate solidarity with their veiled, working-class sisters', the veil became an 'oppositional and revolutionary gesture' as opposed to a 'coercive' form of control. Specifically, their act of essentializing Iranian women into a unitary group of subjects enabled 'Iranian women', as a now putative political group, to pursue the aim of rejecting the Shah of Iran. The act of essentializing Iranian women as a cohesive unit is an example of Spivak's ontologically 'positivist essentialism' and their opposition to the Shah constituted a 'visible political interest'. In the case of the Asian electronic music scene in New York City, this argument can be utilized to understand why 'Indian American' or 'South Asian American' are sometimes reified as unitary in order to attain a progressive political end such as antiracism. This was the case when the scene became involved in activism designed to combat the racism and racialized violence experienced by immigrant South Asian taxi drivers in New York City.[8] Vivek Bald worked with Biju Mathew, a prominent South Asian academic and New York Taxi Workers Association (NYTWA) organizer, to mobilize middle- to upper-class South Asian-Americans. Bald used the Asian electronic music scene to publicize screenings of his film

Taxivala/Autobiography (1994), which explored the racism against South Asian drivers, who constitute over 50 per cent of the city's taxi force (Prashad, 2000: 199 and 202). Participants were then encouraged to become involved in the NYTWA's campaigns. The positivist essentialism here is 'South Asian' and the visible political interest is the struggle to end racism against 'South Asian' taxi drivers.

'Desi' *NYC*[9]

Prior to the existence of Mutiny, 'Asian electronic music' clubs were only to be found in the UK.[10] This is not to say that the New York City's 'Asian electronic music' scene is a facsimile of the scene in the UK. Rather, it is a unique amalgamation reinterpreted by the Asian diaspora in New York City. In the words of DJ Zakhm, one of the resident DJs at Mutiny, New York City's Asian electronic music scene is 'a space where South Asian-Americans can be seen as the producers, owners and participators in something *unique to their own experience* – as New Yorkers, as Americans, as South Asians, as *desis*, and as musicians'. The social spaces, musics, and politics centred around this scene are born from the positionalities DJ Zakhm is referring to.

In particular, New York itself provided a uniquely fertile ground for Asian electronic music. By way of background, 1990s New York City had the largest concentration of Indians in the United States (Khandelwal, 1995). New York City's South Asian community is also religiously, economically, politically and socially diverse (Khandelwal, 2002). Additionally, the city's Asian neighbourhoods tend to be home to immigrants from across South Asia. As Mohammed-Arif (2002: 45) observes, Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani shops in Jackson Heights, Queens, 'are found cheek by jowl' and the shops cater to all three groups with signs such as 'Indo-Pak-Bangla'. This concentration, if not ghettoization, of diverse South Asian groups has provided different opportunities for diasporic cultural development than have occurred in other, more homogenous, American locales.[11] Second, New York's Asians, in contrast to other Asian communities in America, have historically resided in extremely multiethnic neighbourhoods, which, as Khandelwal (1995: 181) argues, forced them to 'conceive their spaces – residential, business, and cultural – within the complex intercultural relations' developing in neighbourhoods such as Queens. The ethnic diversity of these neighbourhoods exposed the children of Asian immigrants to a variety of musical styles, from Trinidadian soca to Korean pop.

Unfortunately, these 'intercultural relations' in Queens were also subject to overt racism, including stone-throwing, defacement of temples, and verbal abuse (Khandelwal 2002: 172).[12] It was in the Queens of the 1970s that DJ Rekha was taunted by other kids as a 'smelly Indian' (Arana, 1997: 62) and Indian-born writer Suketu Mehta (also considered malodorous by

classmates) was called a pagan by teachers (Mehta, 2005: 8). This racism extended from the playground to physical violence against South Asian taxi drivers (Mathew, 2005; Mohammad-Arif, 2002). The racism against South Asian taxi drivers, for example, also manifested itself in institutional forms when they were denied US federal emergency relief funding immediately after 9/11, despite the fact that the largely white-owned taxi garages and fleets received this funding tied to loss of earnings (Mathew, 2005: 144–56).[13] It was within this politically volatile context that the co-founders of the Mutiny club, Vivek Bald and Rekha Malhotra, began attending Asian-American studies conferences and discussing South Asian-American politics. Prior to Mutiny forming in 1997, Bald also made a documentary film *Taxivala/Autobiography* (1994) detailing the biographies of New York's South Asian taxi drivers. Bald and Malhotra were actively involved in community activism such as antiracism projects and the South Asian Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS), founded to counter the rise of the Hindu Right in the USA.

Mutiny also grew within this environment. Furthermore, as a scene in New York, it was influenced by broader political and cultural trends within New York City, including other diasporic musical scenes.[14] 'Electronic music' artists (Asians as well as others) from the UK and elsewhere also began performing at Mutiny through Bald's involvement with the global 'Asian Underground' scene. These overseas artists weaved diverse political and cultural messages into their performative narratives. The antiracist politics of Badmarsh and Shri, Asian Dub Foundation, and others, influenced the atmosphere of Mutiny through their performances and interactions with New York's Asian electronic music scene in the late 1990s. As DJ Zakhm alluded to, the musicians of Mutiny brought their personal experiences and background (e.g. class, ethnicity and politics) into the music and the aesthetic of the scene. Similarly, many respondents emphasized how Mutiny provided a forum for them to interact with other left-leaning Asians.

This idea of Mutiny as a politicized social network is critical. It was a network produced by a series of exchanges, rather than as a scene with a fixed origin. As black culture is a 'process of movement and mediation' (Gilroy, 1993: 19), Mutiny and Asian electronic music in New York City similarly lacked a singular 'root'. It would not be accurate to classify this scene as 'rooted' within the Indian subcontinent on the basis of a purported 'Asian' aesthetic, as it is the child of 'routed' influences that include music, politics, and emigration, amongst other things.[15] In praxis, the two were sometimes elided, a phenomenon occasionally leading respondents to view the scene as 'hybrid'-ethnically, musically and otherwise.[16] For example, various respondents, as will be discussed later, refer to the New York scene as a mixing/fusion of 'American' and 'Indian'. Such logic follows the fact that 'identity' in the USA is itself usually conceptualized as additive (e.g. African-American). These hyphenated identities, set against a backdrop of political

correctness, are unsurprisingly 'riven with internal conflict' (Rattansi, 2005: 47). Continuously changing categorizations such as 'African-American' are not monolithic wholes (Johnson, 2002), but rather contain diverse individuals and subgroups with hugely disparate social histories – histories not always readily acknowledged by mainstream America.

In relation to the label 'South Asian Americans', those such as Shankar and Srikanth (2000: 370) argue that positive invocations of 'South Asian American' are possible when the meta-category's diverse substructure is simultaneously acknowledged. This cuts to the core of the tensions within the term 'South Asian American' itself. The hyphenated label seemingly invokes difference and sameness simultaneously in what Stuart Hall (2006) refers to as a 'double dynamic'. The 'South Asian' and 'American' are not inherently discrete particulars, but rather can serve as forces within this double dynamic of difference and sameness. This is hardly seamless.

SOLIDARITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Some members of the Asian electronic music scene believe that classifying Mutiny as essentially 'Asian' will further solidarity within the Asian community. Asians, disproportionately working-class ones, have in various ways been marginalized in US society (Mathew, 2005; Prashad, 2000). Kibria (2006: 225) argues that, post 9/11, escalated hostility and violence led South Asians to see the urgency for 'coalitions of solidarity'. Mutiny became part of these coalitions. Key organizers of the scene, such as DJ Rekha, Vivek Bald and DJ Zakhm, had been deeply involved in activism and brought their experiential knowledge with them. Many DJs and Mutiny participants believe that Mutiny served as a vehicle for Asian solidarity and community (amongst predominantly well-educated, middle-class Asians).[17] Bald, one of the co-founders of Mutiny, observes that a critical factor for the creation of this club was that he and DJ Rekha 'wanted to create a new South Asian cultural space where our own local [Asian] talent could develop and grow' as other clubs and forums, in their mind, were not accomplishing this (Bald quoted in Ol' Curly, 1998: 53). It is not just Asian musicians who feel that clubs such as Mutiny foster feelings of solidarity and community. Rather, some of the participants of the Asian electronic music scene expressed similar sentiments. One respondent, Laila, remarked that Mutiny 'allows alternative/political/left South Asian culture to express itself, experiment, and reinvent itself [. . .] *without judgment*'. Though Laila is essentializing Mutiny as a 'South Asian club',[18] the move is strategic. What is also interesting is that the strategic solidarity generated by terming Mutiny a 'South Asian club' is not diminished by the fact that the events include many non-Asians (as seen in Figure 1).[19]

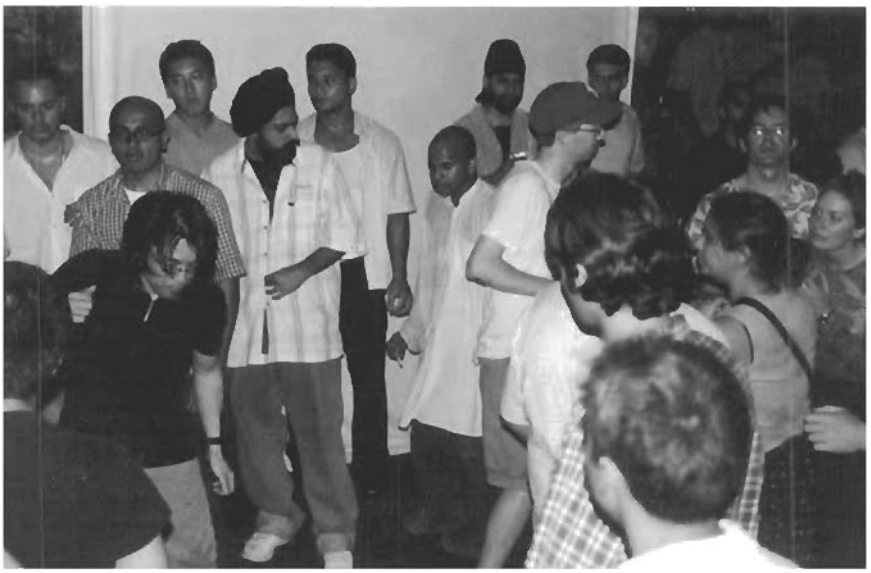

Figure 1 A mixed crowd at Mutiny (Photograph by Dhiraj Murthy)

However, most respondents who identified themselves as South Asian also observed that this scene should still be labelled and perceived as 'South Asian', regardless of the involvement and participation of non-Asians in this scene. One middle-class white respondent, Hannah, argued that 'there's definitely more South Asians [. . . in this scene than others] but that's not what it's about'. Hannah's comment exemplifies the view of Asian electronic music as a non-ethnic aesthetic community. Broadly speaking, individuals such as Hannah believe that the motive for participating in this scene is appreciation of its music, politics and dance, rather than for exclusively ethnically motivated reasons. An Asian DJ at Mutiny, DJ Zakhm, concurs when he argues that 'Mutiny is about music – not the skin color of the people that attend.' Hannah goes beyond this argument and challenges the whole concept of essentialized South Asian labels, by asking the rhetorical question, 'Well what is South Asian anyway?', observing that 'the whole of India' is not homogenous. Rather, she believes that the scene and its music should be viewed as a 'fusion [. . .] from so many different influences'. The observations by Hannah and Zakhm are critical in that they articulately forward the position that this scene is based on musical aesthetics rather than ethnicity. The critical theoretical issue, however, is if the two are mutually exclusive. Operationally, the crux is the distinction between what constitutes a good faith appreciation of 'South Asian'-influenced cultural elements versus a dilettantish one, a tension that will be discussed later.

DJ Zakhm's assertion that the scene is 'about music – not the skin color of the people that attend' is a key tension. Central to understanding it is whether his ideal is correct in theory or praxis. This article argues that the scene's commodification prohibits its existence as a purely aesthetic form. Like other creative forms, Asian electronic music, when commodified, is no longer a 'work of art' in the strict aesthetic sense Walter Benjamin (2003) evokes. Rather, its commodified mimesis qualitatively transforms its nature (Benjamin, 2003: 257). This distinction between the music's aesthetic value and commodified use value is critical; the two are not mutually exclusive. In his essay 'Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility', Benjamin argues that technological reproduction has democratized art, leading to 'absolute emphasis' being placed on art's exhibition value (Benjamin, 2003: 257). From Benjamin's perspective, this qualitatively transforms the work of art into a construct (*Gebilde*), whose 'artistic function' may 'subsequently be seen as incidental'. The transformation of 'work of art' into a construct with an incidental artistic function affirms exhibition value over an aesthetic value. This is clarified by Benjamin in a footnote where he cites Bertolt Brecht's argument that the concept of 'work of art' can sometimes no longer be applied to a form when it has been 'transformed into a commodity' (Brecht, 1931: 301–2 in Benjamin, 2003: 274).

Brecht's argument that the aesthetic label of 'work of art' be cautiously revoked when art becomes commodified is central to understanding the complex forces at work in the Asian electronic scene in New York City. For the musical aesthetic DJ Zakhm propounds is qualitatively challenged by the scene's commodified exhibition value. As Brecht (1931: 301–2 in Benjamin 2003: 274) observes, this does not liquidate the scene's artistic aesthetic. Rather, it fosters a simultaneous duality, wherein the scene as 'work of art' exists alongside the scene as capitalist 'commodity'. Though the commodification process can be considered democratizing in terms of access to the music, it does qualitatively transform its function.[20]

In the case of Asian electronic music, the scene can be stripped of its 'use value' and be treated as a commodified product whose exchange/exhibition value becomes of crucial importance. For example, some individuals feel that 'Asian electronic music' is a way for them to experience something mystical. Others feel that the scene is a means to get in touch with their 'Asian roots'. However, both of these groups, though for very different reasons, see a high exhibition value for this scene; the aesthetic value is sidelined or elided with exhibition value. If the scene as *Gebilde* functions within a system of American 'racialized capitalism' (Sharma, 1996), this commodification can and does propagate neocolonial Orientalist forms of control over the scene's South Asian producers. Like other cultural products classified as exotic or mystical, Asian electronic music is marked by difference, connoting visions of a desirable exotica – an exhibition value that tends to sell well (Hutnyk, 2000). Hutnyk and Kalra (1998a) argue that

various musicians since the Beatles have orientalized and exoticized South Asia as something mystical and magical. Music, or food as Mathew (2005: 177–83) argues, packaged as exotic induces a quasi-colonial desire for the 'native'. It becomes a passport to exotica for producers and consumers alike.[21] The music as 'exotica' is subsumed within the scene's exhibition value, whereas its intertwined aesthetic value can simultaneously be based around an antiracist politics. This polar dynamic of the scene is being reflected in the tension between essentialist/anti-essentialist discourses of respondents such as Hannah and DJ Zakhm.

In sharp contrast to Mutiny, another New York City Asian electronic music venue, Paisley, explicitly commodified the scene as exotic in their marketing (see Figure 2). Paisley was an antique furniture shop in Manhattan's downtown Flatiron district that, by night, transformed itself into a dimly lit bar that hosted many of the DJs of Mutiny. In juxtaposition to Mutiny, Paisley used an explicitly ethnically essentialist vision of Asian culture as exotic to not only sell its furniture, but also to attract those who wanted to nocturnally sample 'exotic' Asian culture. The Paisley website echoed this vision, when it proclaimed that their 'objective is to offer the absolute *best of exotic Asian*' furniture as well as art.[22] Paisley's 'objective'

Figure 2 Advertisement for the Bhom Shankar events at Paisley during the summer of 2001 (image reproduced with permission, name withheld by request)

of selling an India as aesthetically exotic follows historical American exoticisms of the subcontinent (Prashad, 2000: 20–22).

In two separate interviews, Hannah and another respondent, Anna, argued that Paisley used this exotic portrayal of Asians to entice individuals from other ethnic groups to attend its events. They believed, in sympathy with Adorno's (1991) views of commodity fetishism, that some of these individuals participated in the Asian electronic music scene in order to 'experience the exotic Asian' as opposed to a specific interest in the quality of the music. Banerjea (2000: 65) elaborates on this, though in the context of similar venues in the UK, when he argues that these exoticized cultural spaces provide middle-class whites with a 'sanitized encounter' with an imagined Asian 'other'. Banerjea's argument is important in understanding Paisley in that it has also, as Anna argues, deliberately created a space that exoticizes Asians for the enjoyment of middle-class whites. In her words, Paisley allows these individuals to 'sit on South Asian furniture' and 'listen to South Asian influenced music [. . .] without getting their feet dirty', affirming Banerjea's 'sanitized encounter'. Similarly, another respondent, Rajini, argues that Paisley economically exploits an exotically essentialist view of South Asian culture in that 'it presents South Asian elements as something exotic [. . . when] they should be presented as furniture and music from just another place'. In a very Spivakian vein, Rajini adds that 'calling something South Asian can help South Asians or hurt them'. She firmly believes that an ethnic label, in the context of 'Asian electronic music', should be 'carefully used' in that it can perpetuate stereotypes of Asians and, on the other hand, even possibly make those who are not Asian feel unwelcome and unwanted within this scene. In contrast to Paisley, she believes that Mutiny provides a 'nicer setting, because it is neutral'; it is not explicitly characterized as Asian. Logics resembling Rajini's influenced the founders of Mutiny. The overt ethnic essentialism of labelling their events as South Asian seemed to do more damage than good.

EXOTIC ASIANS OR ELECTRONIC ASIANS?

Some respondents also believed that essentializing Mutiny as Asian would promote it as a public space that is free of racism towards Asians. Proponents also argued that venues accepting of South Asian cultural expression such as dance (see Figure 3) can also be rare. For despite the new transformations in racial awareness and integration brought about by the American civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, 'post-civil rights' America (Frankenberg and Mani, 1996: 274) has persisted in retaining old racisms, which has kept Asians, and particularly Asian women, out of many American public spaces.[23] DJ Rekha's presence in the scene is therefore exceptional.

Figure 3 Mutiny in full swing (photograph by Dhiraj Murthy)

Those who sympathized with 'rooting' this scene to South Asia argued that an anti-essentialized labelling would create *just another* public space, subject to racist public norms. Though Gilroy's (2000: 12–13) argument that antiracist efforts are best pursued without 'rooting' culture is poignant, these respondents felt that exclusively 'rooting' this scene would sacrifice the significance that: (1) this scene was 'started by the South Asian diaspora' and (2) it holds a special political, social and cultural significance for Asians. Rajini elaborates on the latter point, stating that 'having brown skin can act as a link [. . .] in this type of environment'. A similar situation occurred in bhangra scenes,[24] where bhangra music was viewed by many Asians as something essentially Asian. In the words of one of the lead singers of the UK bhangra outfit Cobra, 'Bhangra is Asian music for Asians' (Sharma, 1996: 35).

Despite being problematic on various fronts (especially the invocation of a cohesive 'Asian' group), this assertion that Asians 'own' bhangra is critical. It illustrates that some Asians have been attracted to scenes created by Asians not just because they may enjoy the music, but because they feel they can claim an 'authentic' ownership of the scene on a quasi-primordial, 'brown skin' level. For example, one respondent, Anjali, remarked: 'I don't like to think of myself as strictly American, and there are not that many opportunities or places [besides the 'Asian electronic music' scene] where

[I] can go to reconfirm the "Indianness" in me.' In her words, this 'Indianness' is 'a strain that is not strictly religious or traditional'. It should be noted that this conception of 'Indianness', though essentialist, is distinct to many ethnonationalist essentialisms within the bhangra scene (Maira, 1999: 37). For Anjali, the scene is instrumental in that Asian electronic music is a means to strengthen or renew her ties to ethnicity (Roosens, 1989). It is interesting to note that the 'Asian electronic music' and Bhangra scenes both essentialize – sometimes for similar, but generally for very different reasons.

For example, the bhangra scene's audience in New York City has been almost exclusively Hindu and Sikh. This membership has proved to be a fertile ground for ethnonationalist essentialisms (Maira, 1999).[25] In contradistinction, the New York City Asian electronic music scene is ethnically diverse. With roughly a 50 percent non-Asian membership, the context is not especially conducive to Hindutva recruitment. Rather, essentialisms espoused by Asians in the Asian electronic music scene tend towards a politics of recognition (Taylor, 1997) rather than a politics of ethnic superiority. Specifically, many respondents categorized this scene as Asian in order to refute other essentialized visions of Asians – especially American stereotypes of Asians as doctors, lawyers, engineers, or other professionals ('the model minority'). These respondents argued that it was important to view Asians as 'equal' members of society, who were involved in a variety of professions and also created and participated in leisure activities. For example, one Asian respondent, Gurmeet, believes that the scene 'disproves the notion that South Asians cannot collaborate in group settings'. Another Asian respondent, Rajini, observed that the scene 'creates a more positive image of South Asians as not just doctors/lawyers etc., but as a diverse group like any other'.

This argument by South Asian Americans is not uncommon, as their classification as a high-achieving 'model minority' is a double-edged sword (Rangaswamy, 2000: 93–4). It glorifies the 'group', but simultaneously glosses over class diversity, keeping deserving South Asian-Americans out of positive discrimination programmes (Rangaswamy, 2000: 93–4). However, one must ask why this scene has to be ethnically essentialized as Asian in order to de-essentialize South Asian Americans as a group. The bhangra remix scene essentializes itself as ethnically Asian not only in the advertisement of itself, but also through how its members portray the scene. This is an explicit effort to keep the scene predominantly Asian. The bhangra scene, as Joseph (1999: 145) argues, is conceived as a 'diasporic phenomenon of pleasurability'. This is in sharp contrast to the explicit progressive political aesthetics of Mutiny.

Many of those in the 'Asian electronic music' scene, on the other hand, desire an anti-essentialized vision of what is Asian, but are choosing ethnically essentialized definitions in their labelling of the scene as Asian.

'Rooting' the scene to something Asian usually is invoked for two key reasons. First, as previously discussed, the 'rooting' occurs for solidarity and community – strategic essentialism. Second, it occurs for more personal and ontological purposes; that is, these individuals feel that essentializing this scene as 'Asian', to some extent, is part of a process of self-definition into comfortable discrete particulars. Anjali elaborates by asserting that Asians can identify with the scene in a unique way. For her, the scene and its music 'can mean something special to them and in that sense *can feel exclusive* – they recognize themselves (their specific strain of hybridity) in the sounds'. This 'hybridity' that Anjali is explicitly invoking refers, in her opinion, to identities influenced by both South Asia and America. She expands by claiming that Asian Americans live a life of 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 1994: 2) in the sense that they are both Asian as well as American and the 'Asian electronic music' scene is able, through music, to capture this 'internalized state of identification that moves (perhaps not seamlessly) but at least easily between different worlds [Asian and American] that occupy people's identity'. This argument is critical in that Anjali believes that the scene should be labelled as Asian, because it explicitly manifests this unique form of 'double consciousness', as symbolically represented by a music that has fused sitars with drum and bass beats.

What is interesting in the case of New York City is that the Asians in the scene desire to be perceived as Asian, but not in a stereotypical or exotic fashion. This is in many ways a request to have an anti-essentialized view of an essentially labelled group. Such a tension is not something uniquely symptomatic of this scene, but rather is something recurrent in a politics of recognition. When 'the nation is imagined as a mosaic', every ethnic group, as Eriksen argues, has a desire to represent itself (Eriksen, 1993). But, in order to do so, these ethnic groups must essentialize or create boundaries encapsulating what they feel distinguishes their ethnicity (Barth, 1969). This is further problematized as the agency for ethnic boundary construction in America is increasingly located within the corporate space. As American culture industries have further commodified what they consider 'authentically' ethnic, progressive South Asians such as Anjali have felt compelled to carve out an exclusivity away from media constructions of a unitary South Asian subject. For this reason, Anjali's desire to 'feel exclusive' is less borne out of 'hybridity', than derived from a lack of political recognition. Her invocation of 'double consciousness' should be read within a politicized discourse rather than an exclusive discourse of identity construction. The 'hybridity' being referred to by various respondents is not a particularly relevant issue to the labelling of Mutiny and, as such, is beyond the scope of this article.[26] Rather, it is the politics of recognition that is at the crux of the tensions in labelling the scene.

For this reason, some of the scene's left-leaning activists seek to challenge the media construction that tabla, sitar and Bollywood samples make a music and its scene essentially 'Asian'. Hutnyk and Kalra (1998a) offer support in their argument that Madonna and Kula Shaker have incorporated samples considered to be 'Asian influenced', but their music has not been classified as Asian. Rather, they have been accused of being cultural dilettantes. The difference between the cultural dilettante and the musicians of the Asian electronic music scene is simple. The musicians in the scene have a good faith appreciation of these South Asian cultural artefacts. In DJ Zakhm's opinion, musicians such as Madonna exoticize 'Asian influences'; this music cannot be termed Asian influenced (in a good faith manner) as these influences were exoticized in the first instance. The key distinction Zakhm later expresses is that musicians outside of this scene may have been influenced by Asian culture, which is acceptable ipso facto. However, in his words, they have 'exoticized' or 'fetishized' these influences in the representation and production of their music. Zakhm elaborates by stating that he feels that the 'Asian electronic music' scene, as opposed to other scenes or cultural products, presents Asian culture in a non-exoticized fashion:

> [This scene] offers a space in which South Asians [musicians] are able to express their own unique musical talents without feeling exoticized or fetishized. The [scene] was created by South Asians for people of all types to manifest their interest in South Asian culture *in an artistic fashion*.

DJ Zakhm's distinction of an 'artistic fashion' is critical. Highlighting the tensions Benjamin and Brecht observed regarding commodification and art, the key question becomes whether the music's influences, which are commodified as something exotically ethnic, can dualistically exist with a purportedly unfetishized scene. Zakhm's observation is reminiscent of Asian Dub Foundation's (ADF) track 'Jericho' (Asian Dub Foundation, 1995): 'We ain't ethnic, exotic or eclectic, the only E we use is electric', referring to ADF's belief that the music they produce is electric guitar-based music, rather than ethnically exotic music (cited in Hutnyk and Kalra 1998b). However, there is not a clear-cut oppositional tension between ADF's (and Hannah's) ethnically anti-essentialist views of music produced by Asians and the more ethnically essentialist views of Gurmeet, Laila and Anjali. However, these individuals ethnically essentialize or do not essentialize different aspects of the scene. Some, such as ADF, do not essentialize the labelling of their music as ethnically Asian, whereas others, such as Gurmeet, essentialize only aspects of the scene, which he feels explain Asian identity. Again, it is crucial to understand that within this scene, there exist multiple essentialisms and anti-essentialisms that are not inherently in an oppositional relationship.

THE MUSIC ISN'T JUST MUSIC

> Is the music South Asian? It incorporates South Asian elements – but the bulk of it is produced by non-resident [diasporic] South Asians – so is it South Asian? Or is it American? Or is it British? Or is it just music? (DJ Zakhm, personal interview)

DJ Zakhm believes that the scene and its music is not 'rooted' to a putative South Asia. Rather, from his perspective, the musical aesthetic of the scene transcends ethnically essentialized labels. DJ Zakhm believes that the scene should not be ethnically labelled, but rather should be labelled within the context of the functional category of 'electronic music'. The key question is whether anti-essentialist positions such as this can unproblematically coexist with essentialized visions of the scene. This issue of the political tension between anti-essentializing and essentializing need not result in a stalemate in the case of the Asian electronic music scene in New York City. Rather, the scene's left-wing political aesthetics can be reconciled with the essentialized commodification of the scene. In the case of the Womad festival, Hutnyk (2000: 20) argues that he is 'complicit' in the 'commodification in cultural production' vis-à-vis his attendance 'as a spectator consuming cultural "difference"'. The linking argument that is missing here is why attendance/participation in Womad or a similar act of consuming cultural 'difference' is inherently complicit as well as counterproductive to a strategically positivist political struggle.[27] In the case of the Asian electronic music scene in New York City, the political aesthetic of antiracism runs deep, as evidenced by activism led by Mutiny's organizers. The question is whether they are complicit in the commodification of the scene by becoming participants of the mainstream, 'racialized', cultural industries of New York City. Mutiny has been mainstreamed, a process not inhibited per se by its organizers, bringing 'spectators' who superficially consume exotica into the fold.

However, within the Asian electronic music scene in New York, this process is, contra Hutnyk (2000), not inherently negative. Rather, as Stuart Hall (2006) argues in relation to 'Black British Art' and 'mainstreaming', the struggle for political recognition must be 'in and against the State'. Broadly speaking, Hall is arguing that it is simultaneously possible to be 'complicit' yet politically resist. He cites the example of Rivington Place, a large gallery in East London that will be exclusively promoting 'Black British Art' to the general public. The construction of this gallery marks a qualitative shift in the exhibition of 'black art' in the UK, as it is usually relegated to the confines of smaller inaccessible galleries or under the banner of 'Black History Month'. Hall argues that both the essentialism behind the labelling of 'Black British Art' and his possible complicity are justified in that black British artists must seize every opportunity for

increased political recognition, including struggle from within institutions. This logic resonates with that of positive discrimination (affirmative action) in the United States in that it institutionally reifies 'race' for the aim of increased participation and equality of ethnic minorities within mainstream America. Therefore, even if the 'mainstream' commodifies 'black art' and consumes it through an exotic gaze, the net positive, in terms of increased recognition of black British artists trumps. In a similar vein, the Asian electronic music scene in New York, in its self-labelling as 'South Asian', does essentialize. However, this is more or less done in a strategically essentialist fashion, leading to a similar trump.

Not one respondent in New York City suggested that essentialist and anti-essentialist positions were strictly oppositional. Rather, the data collected suggests that these two general essentializing and anti-essentializing discourses were able to coexist, though not always unproblematically. Despite the dissimilar perspectives of these two camps, they avoided partisan judgements by focusing on a key similarity – their unanimous appreciation of the music associated with the scene. Navdeep, a DJ at Mutiny, downplays the labelling of the scene when he observes, 'Whether it [Mutiny] be South Asian or not, there was not a [New York City scene] . . . that offered the [musical] diversity that Mutiny offered [and] . . . that unique fundamental property of Mutiny is what has allowed it to gain the appeal that it has'. Navdeep's comments should be read as a claim that the scene's unique musical aesthetic, as opposed to an ethnically essentialist label of 'South Asian', is what has helped it grow. This perspective is critical as it cuts to the crux of many of the issues this article has been exploring. Specifically, is the scene's appeal based exclusively on musical aesthetic or on its position as a South Asian space engaged with macro-cultural dynamics?

CONCLUSION

Musical aesthetic value within the Asian electronic music scene in New York City is not mutually exclusive to its commodified 'ethnic' exhibition value. Simply put, the two interact. The aesthetic diversity Navdeep is describing encompasses commodified exoticisms as well as anti-essentializing forces. The two exist as strange, but not unnatural, bedfellows. The tension generated between the labelling of the scene as 'electronic' rather than 'South Asian' is sometimes complementary and sometimes oppositional. Some individuals may ethnically essentialize the scene for the purposes of musical classification, whilst concurrently arguing that what is ethnically Asian should not be essentialized as homogeneous (as this can

perpetuate negative stereotypes of Asians). Other respondents considered such a position to be inherently incompatible.

In review, it appears that this complex discourse should not be reduced to a dialectic between purist visions of essentialism and anti-essentialism. Rather, the respondents seemed to be arguing about *how* and *why* the scene was being ethnically essentialized in the ways it was. All of the respondents believed in some level of functional essentialism, whether it be ethnically oriented or not. Therefore, the critical relevance of this research has not been to argue whether this scene and its music should be essentialized or not. Rather, it has sought to explore how the tension between essentialized and anti-essentialized critiques of 'Asian electronic music' have occurred. Ultimately, the data seem to suggest that much of the essentialism being advocated by the scene's participants is 'strategic' in the Spivakian sense (Spivak, 1988). The bulk of the scene's participants who advocate ethnically essentialist labelling do so for meritorious sociopolitical ends. Furthermore, as previously argued, these individuals believe that the use of an ethnically Asian label provides a means for this scene to unify Asians participating in it, as well as assist Asians in negotiating and understanding their identities as 'curdled' (Lugones, 1994) or mediated by a 'double consciousness' (Du Bois, 1994: 2) as hyphenated Americans.

Ultimately, this analysis has uncovered a significant tension between essentializing and not essentializing this scene as ethnically Asian. It therefore seems premature to conclusively object or concur with DJ Zakhm's observation that the scene 'is about music – not . . . skin color'. Many of the Asian members of this scene felt that the classification of 'Asian electronic music' as Asian, or as something non-ethnically labelled, has very real and significant impacts, especially in regards to their ethnic identity formation. From the safe comfort of the academy, it is easy to argue that the scene should not be ethnically essentialized. However, once immersed within the safe antiracist public space provided by Mutiny, I also began to empathize with respondents, who, as diasporic Asians had faced significant racism, but had collectively created and supported a cultural space – Mutiny. In this small dance hall, they did not have to fear, but rather could be united in antiracist efforts while dancing the night away, not as exotic and mystical second-class citizens, but as fully-fledged Americans.

Notes

1 Mutiny was originally founded to finance Vivek Bald's film *Mutiny: Asians Storm British Music* (2003). Though, it outlived this singular purpose, Mutiny closed down about five years later – one year before the release of Bald's film.

2 In this article, the term 'Asian' will be used according to its usage in British English – that is, it will be considered synonymous with the term 'South Asian'.

3 Samplers are pieces of electronic equipment that record short samples of any

audio input, such as a chorus from a song or several seconds of a newscast or film, and these audio clips are manipulated and then interspersed by musicians or live DJs.

4 Bhangra in New York City is musically, socially, and politically different from Asian electronic music. Though the two are not mutually exclusive, they should not be conflated.

5 The data presented in this study is from three months of fieldwork conducted in New York City during the summer of 2001. In addition to standard methods of qualitative interviewing and ethnographic participant observation, I also employed the use of two web based questionnaires. The names used for the respondents mentioned in this research are aliases, unless such anonymity was explicitly undesired.

6 It should be noted, however, that Gilroy considers both positions as inherently essentialist, with the former being considered ontologically essentialist, whilst the latter is strategically essentialist (e.g. for antiracist political ends)

7 Some of the essentialism behind Sayyid's (2006: 8) favoured label of 'BrAsian' is centred around what he calls an 'ironic citizenship', where Asians in the UK experience 'deep seated scepticism about the dominant mythology of Britishness'. The label 'BrAsian' acknowledges the political history and progressive potentialities of Asians in the UK.

8 For a more detailed discussion of the New York Taxi Workers Association, see Prashad (2000) and Mathew (2005).

9 *Desi* is a Hindi word meaning 'from my country.' In the South Asian diaspora, it is used colloquially to signify someone from South Asia. It has much the same connotation as the use of 'homeboy', 'homegirl', brother and sister in black diasporic vernacular.

10 Talvin Singh's Asian electronic music-style club night, Anokha, was created in London in 1996 (Banerjea, 2000: 76). Today, they are found in several cities with large concentrations of diasporic Asians.

11 For example, the vast majority South Asian diasporic communities of Orange County and Silicon Valley, California are composed of professionals from the middle to upper classes.

12 Tensions with other ethnic minority communities such as the Korean and Chinese immigrants have been problematic in Jackson Heights, for example. See Mohammed-Arif (2002) for a more in-depth discussion.

13 As Mathew (2005) explains, some drivers were eventually awarded this funding after the taxi drivers' union stepped in with public meetings with Federal and local officials.

14 For example, DJ Rekha started a bhangra night, *Basement Bhangra*. Her involvement with this was not wholly mutually exclusive to Mutiny.

15 Gilroy (1993: 103) similarly argues that hip hop is inaccurately 'rooted' to black culture, whereas in reality it is 'routed', incorporating styles from Kingston, but also those of the Hispanic cultures in the Bronx.

16 Though Young (1995), Hutnyk (2005), and Gilroy in Lott (1994) have argued persuasively on the theoretical shortcomings of 'hybridity', especially regarding its invocation of anterior purities, out of the academy and on the street, hybridity, as During (2005) observes, persists. The use of 'hybridity' here is solely referring to its invocation by respondents.

17 This conclusion that the Asians at Mutiny were predominantly middle-class was drawn by correlating the online questionnaire data regarding ethnicity and class. For example, every Asian respondent, with the exception of one individual, declared themselves as 'middle-class', 'upper middle-class' or 'lower middle-class'. The lone respondent was self-declared as 'upper-class'.
18 The term 'South Asian club' was used by numerous respondents of the online questionnaire to refer to a club that, in their opinion, was influenced in some way by cultural flows traditionally associated with the Indian subcontinent.
19 Furthermore, none of the respondents to the online questionnaire argued that the inclusion of non-Asians would dilute this solidarity and community.
20 These arguments draw on Marx's (1978) theories of commodity fetishism.
21 This phenomena is by no means exclusive to music, but rather, as Hutnyk and Kalra (1998a) observe, a similar process occurred with the use of the *bindi* in popular culture.
22 Excerpted from Paisley's official website in 2001 (Paisley, n.d.).
23 Gopinath (1995: 306) discusses how DJing has been historically inaccessible to women. Therefore, it is doubly significant that Malhotra was the first female Asian DJ in New York (Maira, 2005a: 197).
24 Bhangra remix usually remixes Punjabi tracks (with *dhol* percussion) and electronic beats. This scene in New York City is generally implicitly and explicitly marketed as an Asian-only scene.
25 One respondent, Gita, expands, stating that 'Bhangra also has a more mass appeal with South Asians [. . . in that] it's a product designed to please South Asians first and foremost', whereas Mutiny and the Asian electronic music scene is targeted towards a more ethnically diverse group.
26 See Young (1995) and Hutnyk (2005) for a critical discussion on 'hybridity'.
27 Hutnyk does elaborate that Womad has activist stalls and campaigns that the 'spectator' can engage with. However, from his perspective, these activities and the musics being consumed are not grounded in a full understanding of the background histories/politics of the issues being campaigned for, leaving the politics, at best, as a politics of the exotic, and, at worst, as a fetishized carnival of 'difference'. The latter is used as his critique of Transglobal Underground's pedestrian use of Nepali masks in their performance (Hutnyk, 2000).

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